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ABSTRACT

Although it does not express the official position of the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) or of the NCTE Committee on Instructional Technology, this annual report of the NCTE Committee on Instructional Technology discusses the impact of technological advances on classroom instruction. The first section of the report documents a definite trend toward using computers in the teaching of composition. The second section of the paper discusses how computers can be used in the three stages of writing--planning, drafting, and revising/editing/proofreading. The third section of the paper cites seven arguments against the use of word processing, including the position that word processing is difficult to learn and takes time away from writing instruction. The fourth section of the paper lists eight steps that can be taken in support of the use of word processing, such as soliciting financial support for school computer labs from parents, local businesses, and government grants. The paper concludes with the opinion of most members of the committee that word processing is the best justification to date for using computers in the classrooms. (DF)

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1985 ANNUAL REPORT OF THE NCTE COMMITTEE ON INSTRUCTIONAL
TECHNOLOGY *

IRENE D. THOMAS on "Uses of the computer in teaching the
composing process"

It is in the area of the composing process that the
microcomputer could indeed have the greatest impact on the
English curriculum. Both the teaching/learning public and
the marketplace are currently responding to this
possibility. The evidence is clear: Most of the computer
sessions at the 1984 and 1985 NCTE conventions were geared
to composing via the computer; countless articles on word
processing have been published in the past year in both
commercial and professional journals; several journals,
including Electronic Learning, have devoted entire issues to
word processing; research being carried out at universities
as prestigious as Columbia Teachers College is focused on
the impact of composing by computer. Meanwhile the
marketplace is rapidly gearing up: Several student-oriented
word processors have appeared in the last year;
comprehensive writing packages that aid the user from
idea-getting to proofreading are either available or under
development-- WANDAH (now called HBJ WRITER), THE WRITING
WORKSHOP, QUILL, THE WRITE STEPS, WRITER'S ASSISTANT and
several MECC products are examples. Moreover, several
well-known authors are under contract to write "generic"
books on using word processors in the writing curriculum .

In sum, a movement is clearly underway.

And not by accident. Anyone who has composed on a word
processor knows that it is very possible that the computer
used with this kind of software in this way could
revolutionize our writing curriculum. We have already heard
countless anecdotal reports about how reluctant writers have
suddenly become eager writers, how children have begun
willing to talk about their writing and share it as they
begin to internalize writing as a process-- a living cycle
of planning, drafting, and revising--a process made
substantially easier by a good word processor used under the
direction of a creative, well-trained teacher. Indeed, word
processing (the very name offers a key) SUPPORTS the
process-model of writing instruction in ways that no other
educational tool can. We believe that anecdotal reports
will in time be substantiated by empirical research. But by
no means should we wait for empirical research before going

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ahead. Our observations and intuitions should be trusted as never before.

THE STAGES OF WRITING

1. Planning: basic text editing functions allow users to generate ideas and explore their thinking without limits. Because, as Stephen Marcus says, "words on a screen dance in light" rather than lie frozen into semi-permanency, the user is encouraged to experiment, to change his mind, to follow an unexpected line of inquiry. All of the prewriting methods fostered by the National Writing Project--clustering, brainstorming, free writing, invisible writing, mapping--are easier to do on a the computer screen than on paper. Programs are already being developed to expedite these processes through appropriate screen prompts, prompts which individualize instruction in a way that saves teachers enormous time. Hugh Burns and Helen Schwartz, both of whom have designed computer programs that engage students in shared dialogs as part of the inquiry/invention stage of planning, have shown the potential power of the computer as an aid to fruitful collaboration. (See Wresch, THE COMPUTER IN COMPOSITION INSTRUCTION, NCTE publication.) In passing, it should be remembered that research on writing competence has already shown that students who plan are better writers than those who don't.

2. Drafting: Again, the ease with which changes can be made encourages students to view their work as one stage of a ongoing process so that they can remain open to sudden insights and major reorganization through "move" functions, and major additions and deletions with none of the obstacles of re-typing an entire piece of work. We believe that research will eventually show that the higher thinking skills we seek to engage students in will be more evident among students who have learned to compose with word processing tools and related support programs, such as those mentioned above.

3. Revising/Editing/proofreading: While even the most sophisticated mechanics and style checkers cannot judge content and other high level writing features, the aids they do provide can serve to free the teacher for real teaching--of higher order thinking skills. In the future, teachers freed from teaching and evaluating mechanics, and who are also trained to focus on substantial issues, may truly become our best educational resources.

Editing aids available to older students through programs such as WANDAH, and to younger students through The

Writing Workshop, for example, check the writer's spelling, diction, sentence and paragraph length, and other measurable features of style. Such well-designed programs encourage students to review their sentence structure as well as direct them back to their original plan to see if major ideas were omitted or changed. They may also remind students of the audience and purpose they indicated during the planning stage. The best of these programs allow teachers to alter data bases; furthermore, they do not force judgments on the writer but merely report features for re-examination. All of the software packages mentioned earlier expedite peer review and sharing in a non-threatening way.

ARGUMENTS WE OFTEN HEAR AGAINST THE USE OF WORD PROCESSING AND EDITING AIDS

1. Word processing is difficult to learn and takes time away from writing instruction.
2. There are not enough computers currently in schools to make word processing a reality.
3. Computer utilization is difficult to incorporate into the traditional classroom setting.
4. Editing checkers may lead to the institutionalization of sterilized, impersonal writing styles.
5. Spelling checkers may produce a generation of non-spellers, the way calculators have reduced the ability to perform calculation.
6. The efficiency of editing aids will encourage students to focus on superficial writing features rather than on content.
7. Word processing requires keyboard skills, and there is not enough time to add this to our curriculum.

We hope that the advantages mentioned earlier address most of these concerns. The remaining few can be remedied over time by NCTE'S active support of the following directions:

1. teacher training and re-training designed with the computer age in mind
2. financial support for school computer-labs gathered from parents, local business, and government grants.
3. incentives to schools, software producers, and universities to conduct individual and collective research projects on the uses of computers in the schools.
4. rewards and recognition to schools that develop and implement excellent models for computer applications.

5. provisions for a forum through which teachers can write about and disseminate their successes with computer applications. (the newly formed Assembly on Computers in Education (ACE) already has identified this as one of their goals.)

6. development of new audiences for student writing through electronic networking and electronic publishing.

7. more opportunities and encouragement for print-out publications of student work.

8. allowing the very best computer applications to lead the way--or at least influence--curricular reform. The realization, for example, that keyboarding will be a fact of modern life should serve as an incentive to readjust the curriculum to allow for keyboarding instruction.

In the opinion of most members of our committee, word processing is the best justification yet for using computers in our classrooms and in our curriculum.